

Impact of Manager Coaching on Learning Transfer

Executive Summary

We all know that a seminar alone is not likely to result in significant changes in job performance. It is also true that much has been written about different techniques to ensure that skills transfer to performance improvement on the job. One technique that has been discussed more than others is the role of manager support and coaching in ensuring that employees use their new skills to enhance job performance. However, while many organizations are promoting manager coaching to improve the transfer of learning, there has been little research on the relative impact of manager coaching. There is even less research available on the critical characteristics of manager coaching that determine the impact on use of new skills.

Only about 15–20% of learning investments result in work performance change.

This paper reports on a subset of the findings of a Wilson Learning study on “Learning Transfer Model: A Research Driven Approach to Enhancing Learning Effectiveness.” In this study, we reviewed literature from the past several years in search of rigorous studies that compared the impact of training seminars alone to training plus different forms of manager coaching. We identified nine studies that provided a direct comparison. These studies were classified relative to the type of preparation managers were given for coaching their employees. Overall, we found that if organizations fully prepared their managers by providing them with (a) the same training that their employees received and (b) training in an effective coaching process, the organization could increase the effectiveness of their learning transfer by more than 40%.

Learning Transfer: Enhancing the Impact of Learning on Performance

The fundamental purpose of learning and development is to help people develop skills that, when applied to work, enhance job and organizational performance. While this is widely acknowledged, popular methods of measuring the success of learning are often not aligned with this idea. Instead, they tend to focus on learning outcomes, not performance outcomes. For example, the most popular model for evaluating learning and development (Kirkpatrick Model) has three levels devoted to measuring learning outcomes and only one level for measuring performance outcomes.

Historically, the focus on learning outcomes, rather than performance outcomes, has also influenced how learning has been designed and delivered. More recently, it has been widely researched (and largely accepted) that learning and development, as usually conducted, does

not create performance change at an acceptable rate. In fact, most estimates suggest that only about 15–20% of learning investments result in work performance change.

The Case for Manager Coaching

Coaching programs—and, in particular, manager-led coaching—are growing in popularity. A study by the American Management Association indicates 52% of organizations report having a coaching program in place and, of those that do not, 37% are planning to implement one.

Yet a number of studies have shown that these programs are not preparing managers to coach effectively. For example, one study of more than 200 organizations found that few managers are skilled at developmental coaching and often fail in their efforts to improve employees' performance (Brandon Hall Group, 2015). Another study found that when managers fail as coaches, this often leads to loss of engagement and motivation on the part of employees (Ladyshevsky, 2010). In addition, a study on managerial coaching found that managers are increasingly expected to take on the role of coaching their employees but are ill-prepared for this role. As a result, tension is created that leads to poorer, not better, performance (McCarthy and Milner, 2013).

Yet when managers are well-trained, studies show that manager coaching can have a positive impact on performance and employee engagement (Liu and Batt, 2010; Ellinger, Ellinger, Bachrach, Wang, and Bas, 2011). So, the key question is what makes for effective coaching preparation? There are several studies (Agarwal, Angst, and Magni, 2009; Gregory and Levy, 2011; Kim, 2014) that have identified critical skills that managers need to coach effectively, including the ability to:

- Provide specific and constructive behavioral feedback
- Use effective communication skills like listening and questioning
- Motivate and hold employees accountable for improvement
- Establish trust
- See different perspectives and show empathy
- Clarify employees' roles and responsibilities

These critical skills point to two important parameters:

1. Managers need an effective coaching process to follow and need the underlying skills to execute on that process.
2. Managers need knowledge of the skills to which they are coaching. Without this knowledge, managers cannot provide the necessary behavioral feedback or the role clarity employees need.

This second parameter has not been widely researched. Many coaching approaches, in fact, discount the importance of managers' knowledge of the specific skills their employees are learning. For example, it is not uncommon for employees to go through a two-day skills training

program in which the manager received a minimal amount of information about those skills, such as a briefing document or a short 1- to 2-hour overview of the skills.

The purpose of our research study was to shed light on the importance of these two parameters. Specifically, we examined the relative value of coaching skills and the knowledge of the skills they are coaching to, as well as their impact on employee performance.

The Study

This study was part of a broader study on Learning Transfer (Leimbach, 2014). For this study, we focused the research on manager coaching and support. The first task of this study was to identify published and unpublished research that met four specific criteria:

- The research compared training alone to training plus manager coaching.
- The research reported statistically significant differences between training alone and training plus manager coaching. This had to be more than anecdotal information so we could compare across studies.
- The outcome measures reported in the results were performance outcomes, not learning outcomes.
- The manager coaching initiative was described in sufficient detail to classify the type of coaching intervention used.

Using a variety of sources, we identified research studies that met these criteria. We reviewed each study to determine the manager coaching process used, and how the performance difference was measured between training alone and training plus manager coaching.

Each study used different measures of performance (e.g., sales, project cycle time, customer satisfaction) and its own statistical method for calculating the performance impact (regression, ANOVA, t-test, etc.). Therefore, for each study, we used the available statistical data and calculated a “difference score” that represented the performance difference between training alone and training plus manager coaching. This allowed us to compare studies, even though they used different statistical methods and different measures of performance. The difference score represented the percent improvement in performance due to manager coaching. For example, a difference score of 20 indicated that manager coaching improved the performance of the participants 20% over training alone.

Findings

We found a total of nine studies that met the criteria above. In general, we found that adding manager coaching to a learning system increased performance outcomes, on average, by an additional 23%. However, there was tremendous variability from study to study, with performance improvement ranging from a low of 7% improvement to a high of 55% improvement.

Therefore, we did a more detailed examination of the nine studies to identify the type of coaching intervention that was done. We found three principle types of coaching interventions:

Adding manager coaching to a learning system increased performance outcomes, on average, by an additional 23%.

Encouragement to coach

In these three studies, managers were instructed or encouraged to coach their employees but no specific training was provided on how to carry out that coaching.

Coaching skills training

In these three studies, managers attended a 4- to 8-hour training session on how to coach. The training covered the presentation of a coaching process model, instruction on appropriate behaviors, and, in some cases, opportunities to practice the new skills.

Coaching plus content training

In these three studies, managers attended an 8-hour training session (similar to above) and also received training in the skills that their employees received.

Table 1: Difference Scores by Type of Coaching Intervention

Type of Coaching Intervention	Source of Study	Difference Score	Mean Difference Score
Encouragement to coach	Axtell et al., 1997	12%	10%
	Saks and Belacourt, 2006	7%	
	Chiaburu and Marinova, 2005	10%	
Coaching skills training	Kontoghiorghes, 2001	18%	18%
	Colquitt, LePine, and Noe, 2000	18%	
	Velada et al., 2007	18%	
Coaching skills training + training in the content to be coached	Leimbach, 2004	55%	41%
	Morin and Latham, 2001	32%	
	Aganwal, Angst, and Magni, 2009	36%	

When the results were divided into these three types of coaching interventions, the impact of manager coaching on learning transfer becomes clearer.

As Table 1 shows, when you examine the results by the three types of interventions, much of the variability goes away. That is, when an organization focuses on encouraging managers to coach, but provides them with no new coaching skills, they see a small increase in performance of 7–12%. When organizations provide new coaching skills to managers, they see a significantly greater increase of about 18%.

However, when you provide managers with a combination of new coaching skills and training in the skills that their employees learned, you accomplish a much higher level of performance improvement between 32–55% or, on average, 41% improvement.

Conclusions

Not all types of coaching require coaches to have extensive knowledge of the underlying skills and competencies to which they are coaching. For example, life coaching or executive coaching programs tend to be broader in nature and, as a result, not skill or competency focused.

However, when it comes to managers coaching their employees, the results clearly indicate that providing managers with effective coaching skills training combined with training in the skills they are coaching to impacts performance much more than training on coaching skills alone. In fact, this combination of training managers on content and coaching skills is shown to be more than twice as effective as coaching skills training alone and is four times more effective than just encouraging managers to coach.

Other research supports these findings. For example, one study found that 84% of organizations regard coaching by line managers as being “effective” to “very effective” (Jarvis, Lane, and Ellery-Travis, 2005). Also, McCarthy and Milner (2013) emphasize not just the importance of training managers but also the importance of a supportive culture created by upper management to enhance training effectiveness.

Recommendations

Activities that enhance the transfer of learning into workplace performance will have an important impact on an organization’s performance and can significantly increase the return on investment for training and development efforts. This study provides convincing evidence that if organizations can do only one thing to support learning transfer, they should focus on the preparation of their managers to coach to the skills their employees are learning.

Clearly, a manager coaching program needs to include basic coaching skills. Our research and experience, however, emphasizes that coaching skills alone are not enough. Unless your managers can provide meaningful, constructive feedback and role clarity, based upon their knowledge of the job and the desired competencies, you are missing more than half the potential impact of the manager coaching.

Providing managers with both new coaching skills *and* training in the skills their employees learn can result in a 41% performance improvement, on average.

In the development and launch of any manager coaching program, organizations should ask questions such as:

- Do my managers have an effective coaching process?
- Do my managers have the necessary leadership and communication skills to coach effectively?
- Do my managers know enough about the skills their employees learned to provide constructive feedback and advice?
- Have my managers had an opportunity to practice these skills prior to coaching employees?
- Has top management created a supportive coaching culture for our managers?

References

- Agarwal, R., C. M. Angst, and M. Magni (2009). The performance effects of coaching: A multilevel analysis using hierarchical linear modeling. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 20(10), 2110-2134.
- American Management Association (2008). Coaching: A global study of successful practices. www.amanet.org.
- Axtell, C. M., S. Maitlis, and S. K. Yeara (1997). Predicting immediate and longer term transfer of training. *Personnel Review*, 26(3), 201-213.
- Brandon Hall Group. Performance Management 2015: Coaching for Development Needed (Rep.) (February 1, 2015). Retrieved July 23, 2015, from Brandon Hall Group website: www.brandonhall.com.
- Chiaburu, D. S. and S. V. Marinova (2005). What predicts skills transfer? An exploratory study of goal orientation, training self-efficacy, and organizational supports. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 9(2), 110-123.
- Colquitt, J. A., J. A. LePine, and R. A. Noe (2000). Toward an integrative theory of training motivation: A meta-analysis path analysis of 20 years of research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(5), 678-707.
- Ellinger, A. D., A. E. Ellinger, D. G. Bachrach, Y. Wang, and A. E. Bas (2011). Organizational investments in social capital, managerial coaching, and employee work-related performance. *Management Learning*, 42(1), 67-85. doi:10.1177/1350507610384329.
- Gregory, J. B. and P. E. Levy (2011). It's not me, it's you: A multilevel examination of variables that impact employee coaching relationships. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 63(2), 67-88. doi:10.1037/a0024152.
- Jarvis, J., D. Lane, and A. Fillery-Travis (2005). Making the case for coaching: Does it work?
- Kontogiorges, C. (2001). Factors affecting training effectiveness in the context of the introduction of new technology: A U.S. case study. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 5(4), 248-260.
- Ladyshevsky, R. K. (2010). The manager as coach as a driver of organizational development. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 31(4), 292-306. doi: 10.1108/01437731011043320.
- Leimbach, M. (2004). A human performance improvement approach to sales effectiveness: How combining training and leadership adds value to the organization. Wilson Learning Worldwide.
- Leimbach, M. (2014). Innovative Approaches to Improving the Transfer and Sustainability of Learning. In *Learning Models for Innovation in Organizations: Examining the Roles of Knowledge Transfer and Human Resources Management*, F. Soliman (Ed.) 2014: IGI Global: Business Science Reference.

Liu, X. and R. Batt (2010). How supervisors influence performance: A multilevel study of coaching and group management in technology-mediated services. *Personnel Psychology*, 63(2), 265-298.

McCarthy, G. and J. Milner (2013). Managerial coaching: Challenges, opportunities and training. *Journal of Management Development*, 32(7), 768-779. doi: 10.1108/JMD-11-2011-0113.

Morin, L. and G. P. Latham (2003). The effect of mental practice and goal setting as a transfer of training intervention on supervisors' self-efficacy and communication skills: An exploratory study. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 49(3), 566-578.

Saks, A. M. and M. Belacourt (2006). An investigation of training activities and transfer of training in organizations. *Human Resource Management*, 45(4), 629-648.

Velada, R., J. W. M. Cetano, B. D. Lyons, and J. Kavanagh (2007). The effects of training design, individual characteristics, and work environment on transfer of training. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 11(4), 282-294.

By: Michael Leimbach, Ph.D.
Vice President, Global Research
and Development
Wilson Learning Worldwide



Wilson Learning Worldwide
8000 W. 78th Street, Suite 200
Edina, MN 55439
800.328.7937
WilsonLearning.com
All Rights Reserved.